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ABSTRACT

Psychological burnout has a detrimental impact on workers in the human service field, and variables contributing to the burnout process need to be explored. In order to examine the relationships between burnout and four commitment dimensions (commitment to a theory, to agency philosophy, to a particular job, and to client service), 47 professionals (37 females and 10 males) serving the developmentally disabled in a day treatment program completed questionnaires. Burnout was measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Results showed that in an agency where the staff shared no strong ideological theory (which is felt by researchers C. Cherniss and D. Krantz to increase commitment and reduce burnout), reduced levels of burnout were correlated with commitment to the agency's philosophy and objectives, and to one's job classification. There was no isgnificant correlation between burnout and commitment to clients. (BH)

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Ideology and Burnout in a Human Service Setting

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[1]This research was conducted while the author was a Research Associate at the Vocational and Rehabilitation Research Institute in Calgary, Alberta.

Abstract

Psychological burnout was assessed in professionals serving the developmentally disabled in a comprehensive day program setting in Alberta. Examined were the relationships between burnout, as measured on the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and various commitment dimensions. Commitment was conceptualized on four possible dimensions: Commitment to a theory, to agency philosophy, to a particular job, and to client service. It was shown that in an agency where there is no strong ideological theory (which is felt to increase commitment and reduce burnout), reduced levels of burnout are correlated with commitment to the agency's philosophy and to one's job classification.

Psychological burnout is the term used to describe maladaptive reactions to stress in the work setting. Burnout involves negative changes in attitude towards work and life in general. Although burnout can be observed in many work settings, it is particularly visible and consequential in the human service field. Because of this detrimental impact, both organizational, job related, and individual variables which contribute to or ameliorate the burnout process need to be explored. The present study investigated the impact of several different dimensions of commitment on the burnout process in staff members serving developmentally disabled adults.

The Burnout Process

Researchers who investigate burnout have recognized that the term comprises a broad range of reactions (Cherniss, 1980a; Stevens, 1982). Burnout has frequently been characterized along dimensions of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion (Maslach, 1978a; Maslach, 1978b; Pines, Aronson & Kafrey, 1981; Thompson, 1980). Some of the common complaints associated with physical exhaustion are low energy, chronic fatigue, weariness, and sleep disturbances. These symptoms may contribute to susceptibility to illness and increase the frequency of work related accidents. Other physical symptoms include general malaise, headaches, nausea, muscle tension, and gastric upset. Emotional exhaustion may involve feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, and excessive crying. The person becomes so emotionally drained that normal coping mechanisms break down. This generally results in the feeling of merely "going through the motions", with nothing left to give. Individuals often do not have the emotional energy to invest in the formation of close interpersonal relationships. Mental exhaustion is characterized by the development of negative attitudes toward work, self, and life in general.

A person who is experiencing burnout can manifest any or all of these symptoms in varying degress of intensity, frequency, and duration. Burnout is not caused by one or two traumatic events; it is an insidious process which occurs at different rates depending on the profession, the individual, and the organizational context. Although there is some agreement on the basic issues, such as symptoms of burnout, each theorist has a particular emphasis when investigating the phenomenon.

Different emphases lead to different definitions of burnout. Maslach (1976) discussed burnout as job stress resulting in a loss of concern for the people being served. Theorists such as Cherniss (1981), however, argued that the definition of burnout should concentrate more on motivational factors such as psychological withdrawal from work as a result of increased stress on the job. Still, other researchers (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980) believe burnout can be as many different things as there are settings in which to experience it. The ubiquitous nature and breadth of the concept of burnout has contributed to some of the confusion in the burnout literature. It is clear that clarification of the issues related to burnout is necessary for further development in such a broad field.

The writings of Maslach (Maslach, 1978a; Maslach, 1982; Maslach & Jackson, 1979) and Pines (Pines & Aronson, 1981; Pines & Kafry, 1978) highlight commonalities found in most burnout models. They believe burned-out workers were once idealistic and had high expectations. For numerous reasons, these workers often seemed to become physically and/or emotionally exhausted. If the situation was not resolved in a positive manner, workers were then thought to use defensive coping techniques such as depersonalization of their clients. By this stage in the process, workers were generally aware of their decreased effectiveness and as a consequence they withdraw from their work. By

withdrawing workers avail themselves to even less chance of personal accomplishment and the burnout process continues.

Burnout in Human Service Professionals

Each occupation has its special pressures and anxieties, hence, burnout has the potential to affect everyone because it occurs without regard for age, gender, or formal training; although these variables are thought to affect the impact and frequency of burnout. The particular amount and kind of stress a person experiences depends on the demands of the job, the beliefs and attitudes toward work the individual has, the environment in which the stress occurs, and the resources available to the professional.

The incidence of burnout is thought to be particularly high in the human service professions (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980; Pines et al., 1981). In this field the effects of burnout extend beyond the family and job, and may have major implications for society with respect to the delivery of service to clients and the frustration felt by the once-idealistic professional. There is a mounting body of evidence suggesting that job stresses and staff burnout in human service programs adversely affect the welfare of the clients. For example, Cherniss (1980a) indicated that the behavior of patients often becomes more disruptive, violent, and even suicidal when staff are experiencing burnout. Maslach and Pines (1977) found that staff in day care centres with high child/staff ratios were much more approving of techniques to quiet children, such as the use of tranquilizers and compulsory naps.

It would appear that human service professions contain built-in sources of frustration which eventually lead dedicated young workers to become apathetic (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980). The work is emotionally demanding for long periods of time. There are enormous feelings of responsibility for recipients' well

being and the consequences of error are serious. Professionals are exposed to their clients' psychological, social, and physical problems and are expected to be both skilled and personally concerned with all of their recipients all of the time.

Another potential source of stress comes from the special characteristics of the professionals themselves. Occupational identity can be enhanced by the homogeneity of people selecting an occupation. The very nature of the occupation serves as a screeing device, attracting people with similar attributes. Most human service providers are probably humanitarian, a quality that makes them vulnerable. They are particularly sensitive toward people in need. If emotional arousal is a taxing experience for anyone, it is particularly disruptive to people who are aware of others' needs.

Another antecedent to burnout is the client-centred orientation adopted by most health professionals. This orientation focuses service on the needs of the people receiving the service as opposed to the needs of the professionals. Pines and Maslach (1978) feel that such a traditional viewpoint is self-defeating. If it is adhered to strictly, then the needs of the professional cannot be met. The relationship is one in which the professional is in the position of power and is supposed to be infallible and make recipients better. The giving is all one way. Little attention in training material is devoted to the emotional stresses on the professional. Most students learn by implication that their needs are not legitimate and the rewards inherent in the work of helping others should be enough to sustain them. Pines and Maslach (1978) feel that the helping profession should recognize that staff needs are also important. They suggest that professionals should be trained to recognize job stress. Additionally, both social and organizational policy makers must be more sensitive to workers' needs so prevention, rather than remediation becomes the focus.

Until recently most studies have investigated organizational correlates of burnout such as number of hours worked (Pines et al., 1981), staff/client ratio (Streepy, 1981), and time out from work (Maslach & Jackson, 1979). Cherniss (1980b) noted that most information presented concerning burnout is of an anecdotal or case study nature.

It has been suggested that many theories and concepts of cognitive and social psychology can be successfully applied in community research and community consultation (O'Neill, 1981; O'Neill & Trickett, 1982). With the organizational settings in which one sees burnout being so diverse, common ground may be found in the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of human service workers. Several cognitive variables have been identified as having a significant impact on the burnout process. For example, professionals' expectations of both their own effectiveness and client change (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980; Stevens & O'Neill, 1983), perceived levels of competence (Cherniss, 1980a), lack of role ambiguity (Pines et al., 1981), and the professional's degree of commitment (Cherniss, 1981; Cherniss & Krantz, 1983).

By suggesting that cognitive variables be examined does not mean that organizational or job characteristic variables have no influence on burnout. Rather, since burnout is manifested at the individual level, an examination of certain cognitive components which are influenced and often formed by interactions with the organization, could provide policy makers with valuable information for reducing organizational antecedents of burnout.

Ideology and Commitment

The present study focused on the relationship between commitment and burnout. The importance of commitment in the burnout process was first introduced by Cherniss (1981) and has since been elaborated on by Cherniss and

Krantz (1983). Cherniss (1981) suggested that most previous research on burnout had been misguided by theoretical and philosophical biases. Rather than reducing the level of commitment and involvement professionals demonstrate as a way of preventing burnout, Cherniss (1981) argued that the opposite of burnout is commitment. Cherniss and Krantz (1983) state that "we have failed to recognize that the most important precursor of burnout is the loss of commitment" (p.198). In examining how commitment is generated and sustained in a social system Cherniss (1981), observed that commitment is often strongest in an ideological community. Yet not all ideological communities prevent burnout. Cherniss and Krantz caution that the political focus of the ideology should not be one of radical social action--in which case failure would be all too apparent--and that the more specific and concrete the ideology is, in terms of day-to-day functioning, the better it protects individuals from burnout. The examples of successful ideological communities which Cherniss and Krantz give are an order of Catholic nuns and a Montessori school, both of which are serving developmentally disabled children.

Ideologies are thought to be effective when supported by a community of others for the following reasons: they reduce much of the ambiguity in human service interventions, they reduce self-doubt which impedes the necessary development of a sense of competence, they provide consistent support and validation, often they emphasize intrinsic rewards, they confer a special status on the more routine or aversive tasks, and they often reduce role strain. Essentially, they provide the how and why about a job and not just the what (Cherniss & Krantz, 1983).

The question remains as to whether or not commitment has a role in preventing burnout in workers who do not adhere to an ideology which includes a moral base--the majority of human service workers.

The present study constituted a preliminary empirical investigation of the role various types of commitment play in the burnout process. The concept of commitment was broadened and conceptualized as having four possible dimensions: commitment to an ideological theory (Cp,Tjepr), commitment to agency philosophy (ComAgen), commitment to a particular job (ComJob), and commitment to client service (ComCl). In this way various aspects of commitment, more meaningful to most workers than just "ideological commitment", could be assessed. On a general level, it was hypothesized that the greater a staff's total commitment (ComTot), as summed from each of these dimensions, the less burnout he or she would experience.

The agency from which subjects were drawn did not support a formal ideological theory as conceptualized by Chernis and Krantz (1983). It was therefore hypothesized that even if individuals did have a specific theoretical approach, since they were not part of an ideological community, their ideological commitment would not be related to reduced levels of burnout.

An employee's support for his or her agency's philosophy of care (as was stated in the mandate and objectives of this particular agency) in some ways parallels the commitment to an ideology in settings which support singular theoretical orientations. It was therefore hypothesized that the greater an employee's commitment to his or her agency, the less burnout he or she would report.

In reviewing the components of an ideological community which prevent burnout, it seems clear that one advantage of the ideology is that it emphasizes the importance of every job, no matter how routine or redundant it may seem. For this reason it was hypothesized that burnout would be inversely proportional to an employee's commitment to his or her job.

Although commitment to the client is of primary importance for service

delivery, based on previous research (Stevens, 1984; Stevens & O'Neill, 1983) it was hypothesized that this dimension would not be related to burnout. It has been demonstrated that the client's influence on the burnout process is secondary to the professional's perception of more personal dimension--such as the perceived importance of his or her job and the degree of value congruence with his or her employer.

Method

Subjects/Procedure

Subjects were comprised of all staff active in providing service to developmentally disabled adults in a comprehensive day program setting. The job titles of participating staff included: rehabilitation counsellors, recreational therapists, social workers, assessment staff, teachers, and special resource personnel. The same client group was involved in most areas of programming throughout all units in the agency.

The agency itself is a non-profit, volunteer board, third sector organization. The mandate of the agency is to develop and disseminate new techniques for the assessment, training, and rehabilitation of developmentally disabled adults. There are high demands on the staff not only to provide a service to clients, but also to develop new programs and be orientated toward research. The agency encourages and is supportive of innovation.

The research material was distributed to, and collected from, all staff on the same day. The purpose of the study was identified as investigating stress in human service professionals. It was felt that for staff to adequately complete the research material that they needed to have been employed for at least one month.

Of the 52 questionnaires distributed, 47 fully completed questionnaires

were received. Of the five questionnaires not scored, three were incomplete and two were not returned. Thirty-seven participants were female, with the mean age of all participants being 27.5 years.

Instruments

Burnout was measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The development of this scale, including reliability and validity data, is described in Maslach and Jackson (1979, 1981). Although Shinn (1982) reports on at least five published burnout scales, the MBI is most widely reported in the literature.

The MBI yields three major scale scores; Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment. All scales are scored on a two-scale format; which includes a frequency and an intensity dimension.

Commitment was measured over each of the four dimensions by asking the following questions:

1. Do you follow a specific theoretical approach when dealing with recipients?
2. Do you support the philosophy of recipient care as put forward by your agency?
3. Do you feel well placed in your present job classification and that the job classification itself is a useful position?
4. Do you feel a consistent commitment to best serve your recipients?

Participants could respond "no" or "yes" to each question and receive zero or one point respectively. The commitment questions were constructed for face validity only. Questions were analysed both independently and as a summed commitment total score--the higher the score the more committed the respondent.

Results and Discussion

Spearman correlation coefficients were computed between all burnout scales and the questions measuring various commitment dimensions.

Insert Table 1 about here

As indicated in Table 1, specific commitment dimensions have a variable impact on the burnout process. The degree of commitment an employee has to his or her job is consistently related to burnout. The higher the commitment to job, the less burnout is experienced.

As expected, there was no relationship between a commitment to an ideological theory and burnout. In discussions with staff it was clear that many held singular theoretical approaches, but the agency as a whole did not support a singular viewpoint. Clearly, there did not exist an "ideological community" as discussed by Cherniss and Krantz (1983). Yet, in such a diverse setting, the more staff agreed and supported the philosophical objectives of the agency, the less burnout they reported.

Finally, there was not a significant correlation between the commitment to client dimension and burnout.

It should be noted that the cross-sectional design of this study prevents policy implications from being drawn. The main purpose of this pilot study was to indicate areas for further inquiry. Although the sequence of the relationship between various commitment dimensions and burnout cannot be determined, it is clear that a relationship exists and does in fact deserve further research.

Table 1

Spearman Correlation Coefficients Relating Burnout Variables to Commitment Variables

	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization of the Client	Personal Accomplishment[a]
ComCl	-.06(-.16)[b]	.11(.16)	.02(-.07)
ComTheor	.22(.20)	.15(.18)	-.05(-.16)
ComAgen	-.29*(-.15)	-.12(-.14)	.54**(.24*)
ComJob	-.30*(-.08)	-.40**(-.39**)	.17(.24*)
ComTot	-.09(-.03)	-.05(-.04)	.33**(.05)

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

[a] On this scale only higher scores indicate less burnout.

[b] For each pair of Spearman correlations, the frequency dimension is listed first and the intensity dimension in parentheses.

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